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Romanian Writer Describes French Foiling of Plot to Kill Him

By Paul Webster
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PARIS, Aug. 31—A dissident Romanian writer, Virgil Tanase, who was believed to have been murdered by Romanian agents, emerged from three months in hiding today to reveal details of an extraordinary secret service operation mounted by the French.

Beside him at a press conference in Paris was a small, bearded man identified only as "Z," who said he had been ordered by Romania's secret police to kill Tanase. Around the building where the conference was held, armed French intelligence agents stood guard.

The would-be assassin and intended victim said that President Francois Mitterrand was kept informed throughout a fake kidnapping scheme by the French secret service to foil President Nicolae Ceausescu's revenge on his critics abroad. Woven into several months of intrigue leading to political asylum for the hit man was a contrived diplomatic incident, a lethal fountain pen and a medal for a murder that never was.

"President Mitterrand was aware of what was going on since April," Tanase said. That was two months before Mitterrand expressed concern at the "tragic theory" of Tanase's disappearance and called off a state visit to Bucharest in protest.

Tanase immigrated to France in 1977 and became a French citizen in 1979.

The Romanian Embassy in Paris today issued an emphatic denial of Tanase's and "Z's" account.

Like a good spy story, Tanase's adventure started with a prologue—the fear among Eastern Bloc refugees after the murder in September 1978 of a Bulgarian dissident in London with a poisoned umbrella. A Bulgarian defector in Paris survived a similar attack not long afterward.

Refugee writers, particularly those working for West European broadcasting stations such as the British Broadcasting Corp. and Radio Free Europe, lived in fear of other sophisticated plots.

After the death under suspicious circumstances of another Bulgarian dissident broadcaster in London, secret service agents throughout Europe stepped up their interest in men linked to Eastern Europe's secret police.

This explains why the French counter-intelligence service, the DST, was so receptive when a Romanian agent—"Z"—turned up at their Paris headquarters early last spring and asked for political asylum for himself and his family. In exchange, he gave details of his mission in France—to murder writers Paul Goma and Virgil Tanase.

Goma had angered the Romanian president with a series of books including "Dogs of Death" that described Romanian concentration camps. Tanase had written a mocking account of Ceausescu, whom he described as communism's first king.

The first target was to be Goma, "Z" told the DST. The agent also said that he was carrying a fountain pen containing a colorless poison that would kill in a few seconds. As Goma had a weak heart, it was presumed that his death would be seen as natural.

"Z" carried out the murder attempt as planned at a cocktail party with the cooperation of the DST. He dropped the poison in Goma's wineglass, but before the writer could drink it a clumsy guest knocked over the glass. The guest was a DST agent working with "Z."

It was presumed that "Z" was being watched by his own side, which would report that the attempt had failed by accident. This gave the DST breathing space to think up ways of foiling the murder plot against Tanase.

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